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“Hammy”



CHARLOTTE HAWKINS BROWN



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**An Appeal to the
Heart of the South**



"MAMMY"

“Mammy”

AN APPEAL TO THE HEART
OF THE SOUTH

BY
CHARLOTTE HAWKINS BROWN

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THE PILGRIM PRESS
BOSTON

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DEDICATED TO MY GOOD FRIEND

Mrs. Chas. Duncan McIver

GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

IT IS WITH GRATITUDE I ACKNOWLEDGE HER
PERSONAL INTEREST IN THE COLORED MEM-
BERS OF HER HOUSEHOLD AND TRUST THAT
MANY OTHERS MAY FOLLOW HER EXAMPLE

CHARLOTTE HAWKINS BROWN

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Introduction

This story is based upon the following incident:

On a farm near Sedalia died a wealthy spinster who had passed her allotted number of summers. There survived her a faithful colored servant, "Granny Polly," who for more than a half century had answered to every beckon and call, from gardener to housemaid. This "Mammy" lived within a few feet of the back door of her "Charge" in a makeshift cabin, the last left from a group of homes used for slave quarters.


Among the many large and gracious bequests left to distant relatives and friends, "Mammy" received the handsome legacy of twenty-five dollars.

INTRODUCTION

She, now past eighty, is still digging in the garden of a grandchild who gave her shelter. Her best days are gone. Others enjoy the fruits of her many years of labor.

She is but one of many who are left destitute in old age by those she has been faithful to unto death.

“Mammy”

F there is any word that arouses emotion in the heart of a true Southerner, it is the word, “Mammy.” His mind goes back to the tender embraces, the watchful eyes, the crooning melodies which lulled him to rest, the sweet old black face. “What a memory!” he exclaims.

The old cabin leaning far towards the rising sun told that its day was far spent. Here and there, a sill seemed held up by a post, one end of which was buried deep in the ground about eight or ten feet away from the

flint rock foundation—a true relic of slavery days.

It was the only one of its kind in the neighborhood, but the land on which it stood was eyed by real estate dealers and owners who vied with each other as to the purchase of this extraordinarily valuable piece of property. The yard had a look of desolation and neglect, yet the sweet-scented magnolias, roses and syringas, now almost covered with vines, told that long ago a lover of art and beauty had lent a charm to this now forlorn hovel.

The back yard of the cabin opened into the back yard of a regal looking mansion, once the home of one of Virginia's prominent governors. Its stately, massive columns gave it the style and dignity of architecture re-

moved a hundred years from the twentieth century. This spacious residence was occupied by the fourth or fifth generation of the Brethertons, the mere mention of whose name gave tone and color to any picture of social life in Virginia. Like many of their kind, the Brethertons had fought and lost, and all that was left to them after the sixties were the home and the name which made a Bretherton hold his head high even though his feet were bare.

The Brethertons had been compelled to sell, acre by acre, the large farm on which a thousand or more negroes had spent days of toil. Costly residences now enclosed them, until only Aunt Susan and her “Ole Man,” as she called him, could point to the

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spot that marked the slave quarters fifty years before.

Aunt Susan had been the “Mammy” of the family for years before the war. She loved to recall the words of old Colonel Bretherton, who said to her as the last man of the family joined the Confederate army, to bind closer the chains that held her people: “Susan, take care of my wife and children, and if I never come back, stay here; if they starve, starve with them . . . if they die, die with them.”

The old Colonel never returned, and though Aunt Susan heard the voice of freedom calling to her a few years afterwards, she had given her word to the Colonel and she kept it until the day of her death.

The “ole man” had been

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Colonel's body-guard. It was he who brought the news of Colonel's death; his own strong arm had borne the fainting Mistress to the couch of down, but now he sat by the fireside in the old cabin, a paralytic, scarcely able to help himself.

Three times a day for forty years as regular as a clock, dear Aunt Susan went back and forth to the “white folks'” house, and cooked the food that the Brether-ton's thrived on.

The sons grew to manhood and married. Their children and their children's children climbed up on Mammy's knee, nursed often from Mammy's bosom, for one daughter had given her life to give to the world a new life, and this new life lived and thrived from blood of Mammy's blood,

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flesh of Mammy's flesh. This child called “Edith,” because she was the image of her girl mother, Edith, always seemed “near” to Mammy. She was now a young “Miss” at Boarding School, and Mammy's famous beaten biscuits always adorned her lunch when she was leaving, and were never missing from the Thanksgiving box. Then, there was something so historically romantic about the reference when Edith could say to the girls, “My dear old black Mammy baked the biscuits just for me. She's been a servant in our family for forty years or more.” This statement carried with it a degree of aristocracy that only a Southerner can appreciate.

Mammy had long ago laid to rest her own little babe, as she

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always spoke of him, although he had grown to manhood long before. He had offered her a home and every comfort in the North; she preferred the cabin, it seemed—no, it was not the cabin, for oftentimes, on bitter cold nights when the winds would whistle, she would kneel and ask God to be a foundation for the old cabin, until the coming of another day, for each moment she thought it would rock its last time. But, ah, the solemn promise to the Colonel, “till I die!”

Mammy was getting old and rheumatism had set in, so the “white folks” had to get a younger woman to do the cooking, but she must be on hand to do the seasoning, because a Bretherton would not eat a meal at Stone Ledge, as the old Man-

sion was called, unless Mammy had a hand in it.

The days went by wearily for Mammy's "ole man," but the sweet patience with which the loyal soul watched over him was beautifully pathetic. "Ole Missus don't come no more to see us, and de young 'uns has forgotten us," he thought.

The old ties of former days had been broken between him and the friends of his own race; they had moved away. New folks who had no interest in him had come to town. Sometimes Mammy would find him helpless at the wood pile where he had presumed upon the strength of his one good side to lighten her burden to get the wood.

"Ole man," she would say, "I don' tole you to stay in de house

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and let me wait on you; you done been faithful to me and de white folks for many a year, and dere ain't no use in frettin' 'cause you ain't young and spry.” And Mammy would heave a sigh, for growing signs of neglect had weighed heavily on her, since old Mrs. Bretherton hadn't been able to get around.

“Sometimes dere ain't any wood, and sometimes dere ain't much left on the table for my old man. Things am gettin' kind o' curious. Dese here young folks ain't got no time for us. Dey jest like to p'int at us for the family's sake,” thought she, but to encourage “Pappy,” as she sometimes called him, she spoke out in jolly tones, “Go long, Pappy, ‘twice a child an' once a man,’ Colonel used to say; and I 'spec' you's done

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reached dat second childhood. You want dese young 'uns running down here a-climbin' on your knees like dey use to,” and she turned her face to hide the tears. “We’s e been faithful; dese hands hab nursed ebry child in dat Bretherton family. I’s e laid ’em on my lap and ’ugged ’em to my breast,—lors a mussy, I lubs dem children, but little Miss Edith is the only one that thinks enough of Mammy to come down here to de old cabin and see how we-uns is libin’.”

“Bless ma soul, Christmas is coming, and I looks for her like robins do the spring; she brings sunshine,” said Pappy.

Miss Edith came home, bringing some of her friends from the North who attended St. Mary’s school—one of the most select

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boarding-schools in the country. She wanted to give them a taste of a Southern Christmas.

The very interesting course in sociology in school had attacked the cabin life in which the white people had forced the negroes to live, and Edith had become popular by telling of her beloved Mammy, and how she had found shelter within reach of them for forty years, how her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother had cared for her and met her every need. Everybody had warmed up to Edith because of this interesting account of "negro fidelity" and "white devotion."

Hardly had Edith exchanged greetings with the home folks before she realized that it would be perfectly natural for the girls

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to want to see this beautiful picture of service and gratitude. She began to talk it over with her mother (by the way, this mother was a new one whom Edith's father had chosen for her long before Mammy had given up her claim to be the child's sole guardian).

“Mother,” said Edith, “it would never do to carry the girls down to the ‘ole cabin.’ I know it's spotless, but it looks as if it would tumble down every minute, and when I was there last fall, Mammy had a wash tub on top of the bed to catch the large drops of rain.”

“Why didn't you tell your papa?” said her mother.

“Mother,” Edith answered, “I did, but papa said the old folks hadn't long to live, and as soon as they were dead the cabin would

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be torn down and the property would be for sale, and he said it was useless to spend any money on it.”

“Well, don’t let the situation worry you, little girl,” remarked her mother, “your friends will be having such a gay time that the question of sociology in these quarters will not enter their thoughts.”

But in spite of Mrs. Brether-ton’s desire to brush aside the thought of neglect of the two old folks who had been faithful so long, she could not wholly dismiss it.

“Listen, Edith,” said her mother, “we ought to do more for Mammy. This winter when your papa’s business was about to fail, Mammy somehow or other noticed that something had hap-

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pened. It was really necessary to cut down the food supply. She sought the confidence of your grandmother, who loves Mammy as a sister, you know; Granny told her all. Edith, it would have brought tears to your eyes if you had seen them weeping on each other's shoulders. I saw Granny count out ten one hundred dollar bills that Mammy handed to her which she said she had kept as her son's 'surance money.'

"We all thought that boy worthless. I could not understand, but I followed Mammy to the back door. I saw her look towards heaven as she said earnestly, 'Till I die.' "

The tears trickled down Edith's cheeks, but like most young people, it was an emotion for the

moment. She went back into her world of gayety and forgot that Mammy lived.

The holidays came to a close with a blinding snowstorm.

Early in the morning of January sixth, Mammy rose and peeped out, to see the snow piled up high. "Pappy," she called, "Mammy's child leaves dis mornin', and ain't nary beaten biscuit dere to put in her lunch. Dese hands ain't never failed dat child, and de snow ain't going to make dem fail dis mornin'."

Pappy sighed. "Mammy, white folks don't care long for us lak dey used to—we's gettin' old and no 'count."

She protested, however, dressing in the meantime. She pried the door open, while a mass of snow fell on the inside. The wind

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whistled. Bundled up in a shawl, she sought the garden gate, but just as the gate clicked, an avalanche of snow from the roof of Stone Ledge fell, burying beneath it all that was in its path.

An impatient little girl wondered why Mammy didn't come to give her the beaten biscuits.

Late in the afternoon, Pappy grew weary of waiting and watching for her who never stayed away so long. Eating the bread and milk which she always provided for his breakfast did not satisfy him for the day. Soon a whistle, and then a young man rushed into the cabin crying, "Mammy, Mammy, come quick, Grandma is dead."

But no Mammy answered.

Pappy, excited, hobbled to the door just in time to see the snow

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melting. The red bandanna of his mate of fifty years told the story. “Until I die!” She had kept her vow to the last. He swooned to the floor, and how long he lay there no one knows.

Green Hill Cemetery is a beautiful place, and the most prominent in it is marked by a monument of a soldier in uniform—the “Colonel.”

Here his good wife’s remains were laid to rest amidst the funeral rites of Church and state.

A new board marked the last resting-place of “Mammy,” to which she journeyed in the county wagon.

Outside the County Home, occasionally, is seen an old man counting his years into a century, who murmurs unceasingly: “White folks don’t care long for

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us lak dey use to—we’s gettin’
ole and no ’count.”

A sign “For Sale” marks the
place where Mammy once lived.

Each year the Brethertons
make a pilgrimage to Green Hill
Cemetery to plant flowers, but
only the kind honeysuckle creeps
over the grave of the body in
ebony whose soul was whiter than
snow.

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